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Pier claims promising life

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Lured by Lake Michigan's surging surf and brisk winds, eight people ventured out on Grand Haven's south pier late Saturday night to jump over and dodge breaking waves.

Only seven returned to shore.

In an all-too-familiar-scenario, a 19-year-old Grand Haven man was presumed drowned after he was struck by a large wave and thrown off the south pier into Lake Michigan off Grand Haven State Park.

Daniel Luke Reiss, the son of Rosanne Reiss of Grand Haven, has been missing since 11:21 p.m. Saturday after last being seen by friends struggling in large dark waves about 30 yards from the pier head.

Reiss was a sophomore at Grand Valley State University after graduating in 2002 as a top student at Grand Haven

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High School. He was among eight people ranging in age from 18 to 23 who ventured out on the south pier for some "wave-hopping" and were caught off guard by rapidly deteriorating weather Saturday night that produced winds of 40 mph and waves up to 16 feet in height.

The group was rounding the outermost lighthouse on the pier and was heading back to shore when some noticed Reiss was missing. He was last seen struggling in the surf to the southeast as two friends frantically used cellular telephones to call for help and yelled for him to keep swimming toward shore.

Lt. Rick Yonker of the Grand Haven Department of Public Safety said recovery operations are being hampered by weather. Although a 47-foot U.S. Coast Guard boat from Station Grand Haven and a Coast Guard helicopter from Muskegon were called to the scene late Saturday, search-and-rescue operations were called off early Sunday after about three hours because of pounding waves and wind.

Yonker said divers from the Michigan State Police, Ottawa County Sheriff's Department and the city's public safety department gathered later Sunday morning, but called off the search because weather conditions made efforts dangerous. With high winds and waves in the forecast today, Yonker said it is doubtful a search could be launched until Tuesday or even Wednesday.

Mark Reiss remembered his nephew as a "bright, handsome kid." Dan Reiss graduated from Grand Haven High School last year and was attending Grand Valley State University as a freshman. He was considering transferring to Western Michigan University to major in engineering.

"He was the kind of person who never had to crack the books," Mark Reiss recalled. "He was that smart."

While at Grand Haven High School, Dan Reiss was a top student and earned his black belt in karate. He played violin with the school's orchestra.

"He was a real fun-loving kid," Grand Haven High School Principal Scott Grimes said today. "He had a real outgoing personality and a lot of friends."

"He was a nice kid and was well liked," Mark Reiss said. "It's such a loss."

Yonker said Reiss and five other men and two women went out to the western edge of the south pier to watch waves and jump over them as they washed across the concrete

walkway. As they were at the outer lighthouse, the weather began to deteriorate rapidly with winds quickly increasing in intensity. They were circling the lighthouse when they decided to head back toward shore.

"As they were circling the lighthouse, they lost sight of the victim and someone asked, 'Where's Dan?' " Yonker said. "Then they saw him in the water. They heard him yell and they yelled back for him to keep swimming."

At the time he fell in, the water temperature was about 47 degrees. Reiss was wearing a blue jeans and a heavy dark blue jacket. As two of Reiss' friends telephoned for help, others in the group tied their jackets together to create a makeshift rope, but were unable to reach their companion.

Public safety officers were at the scene minutes later and radioed for Coast Guard assistance. A Coast Guard rescue boat fought the waves until 2:40 a.m. The Coast Guard helicopter abandoned efforts around 3:15 a.m.

Yonker said law enforcement agencies were to assess the weather today before deciding to resume search operations. He said the No. 1 concern is for the safety of divers.

Reiss' presumed drowning is the second to occur in just over two months in Grand Haven. Andrew Burton Fox, 17, of Grand Haven, drowned Sept. 3 when he and a friend went swimming in rough waves off Grand Haven State Park. His body was found two days later by using high-tech side-sonar equipment from the Norton Shore Dive Team.

Yonker said this sonar equipment may be used once the recovery resumes.

Drownings "hit hard" students at Grand Haven High School, Principal Grimes said. "It's not unusual for them to hear the facts of how dangerous the pier is this time of year. That message is pretty prevalent around here."

Dan Reiss is survived by his mother Rosanne and his 15-year-old sister Amanda. His father, Michael, died in 1997.

"We're a close family," Mark Reiss said. "And he was so protective of his sister because she did not have a father. He'll be missed very much."

Funeral arrangements will not be announced until the body is recovered, officials said.

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